

Witching Hour

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Summary: The Ghost crew deals with the aftermath of the mission to Malachor, each in their own separate ways.

1. Chapter 1

A/N: First time writing for Rebels, yay! I'm going to start off by saying the finale both absolutely killed me and endlessly inspired me. This is a result of both occurrences, more the latter. It was killing me to write a post-finale with all of my hopes, dreams and theories. Alas, lots of plotting and planning became this thing. I'm going to see how I go. I might finish, I might not, but regardless I thank you for taking a look and supporting me!

Kanan's sure that without Hera's arms around him he would be a heap on the landing platform by now. He's grateful she doesn't let go, and nor does Ezra release his hand, until she says softly, "Kanan, there's a... medical droid here for you. Zeb's going to walk you, okay?" Her voice is detached, like it's a dream. He's not sure exactly who for.

"Okay," he croaks in return.

She lets him go, still stroking a thumb across his shoulder as Zeb snakes a hand around his back. He can't help himself; he shivers without her warmth pressed into his chest.

"Come on, big guy," Zeb murmurs, taking a step. Kanan's shaky legs barely oblige. The back of his mind supplies helpfully: shock, Kanan, you're in shock. "That's it, easy." If he couldn't feel Zeb radiating in the Force next to him, he wouldn't believe it was his hands steadyng him across the platform.

Normally, he wouldn't have heard Hera say quietly to his apprentice, "Come with me, hon. Come on." And, he wouldn't have heard the silence from Ezra in reply, or his minuscule shuffle of movement, or felt the twinge of emotion in the Force as he suppresses tears again. Hera

repeats, "Please, Ezra." and Kanan's legs give out from under him.

Zeb catches him, steadies him, and murmurs something reassuring, but Kanan doesn't hear it; he hears Ezra's footsteps on the platform as he walks away.

By the time they reach the medical wing, Zeb is practically carrying Kanan across the threshold to somewhere he can sit down.

"Kanan, c'mon, you know my superior build is better spent than lofting you humans about," the Lasat remarks, hauling him up onto what Kanan assumes is the edge of a bed. His bum catches on the lip, so he slides awkwardly, half-off, half-on. Zeb groans, "Give me a hand here."

"I will render you some assistance, Mr Orrelios," a mechanical voice chimes far more happily than Kanan is willing to entertain, and soon enough, he is swaying unsteadily, perched on the edge of a bed. "You can lie down if you wish, Mr Jarrus. We will examine you shortly."

He hears Zeb rub his hand over the back of his head; it's a scratching sound, unsettling against his overtime senses.

"You can go, Zeb," he answers the question he knows is on the tip of his friend's tongue. "I'll be fine. I... I want you to keep an eye on Ezra. Hera can't handle that kid all by herself."

"Yeah, yeah. Gotcha," he returns, a little unsteadily.

"Zeb?" Kanan stops him before he turns to leave, making sure he adds, "Thanks."

"No," is the reply, which makes Kanan wish he could see the look on his friend's face currently. "Thank you for coming back." The way he says it; it's so affirming and firm, like when he was leading Chava and Grom through the star cluster towards Lira San. "I think I'd go mad if Sabine only had me to use as painting practice," he finishes.

Kanan huffs a bit of a laugh, and so does Zeb.

* * *

><p>An hour later, there's a fresh bandage across his face, and he's sitting on another bed wondering when he can catch a few hours sleep.</p>

"There's nothing we can do to save your eyes," the non-droid medical officer tells him, still sounding like a robot, "but we are able to minimise your scarring." Kanan swallows, and off-handedly wonders if he can still cry. "Mr Jarrus?"

"Uh, yeah," he responds, his voice cracking. "Whatever you can do. Thanks."

With his heightened senses, he hears the woman exhale slowly out of her nose, and knows her lips are pressed together into a small, sad smile. "Will you require anything... other assistance?" she

asks.

There, he allows himself to crack a bit of a grin. "That's what I've got the Force for, right? To be my seeing-eye droid?" His lips quiver. "Just patch me up, doc."

* * *

><p>He heads straight back to the Ghost, finding Hera exactly where he expected her; head buried under the main console.</p>

"Kanan!" she says immediately. "You should have called me!" She's out from under the controls in a dash, at his side, holding his arm. She sits him down. "What if you'd fallen overâ€""

"Jedi," he reminds her. "Where's Ezra?" he asks next, before she can continue fussing. Not because he doesn't appreciate her care, but because he doesn't want to talk about it, not yet.

"He went for a walk," Hera answers.

That made the breath in Kanan's throat catch a little, but he finds himself nodding in understanding anyway.

He needs to rest before he goes off thinking, otherwise he'll dream, and didn't work well for him after Order 66, especially while on the run.

"And you?"

Hera seems surprised. "Me?"

"Yeah. You had to deal with him. I'm sorry, I tried, the flight back but we had to..." He gestures to himself up-and-down. "Yeah."

"I'm fine," she replies, and then leans a little closer; he hears her shift in her chair. "Are you? You weren't gone long."

He shrugs, and then blurts out, "Hera, I... I want to touch your face. Please." Later, he'll blame it on the pain drugs he doesn't remember taking.

"Sorry?" She doesn't even falter.

"I don't... don't know what it feels like like this."

She doesn't answer for a moment as something sad radiates through the force, but then she says quietly, "Yes, yes, Kanan. Of course you can."

He reaches up to touch her face, gently, and it's exactly the same texture as the last time he touched it. But, this time, he makes sure to check where all of the curves go, where all of the dimples and lumps and bumps are, to see if he can match it to the picture currently in his mind.

It's a perfect copy, of course. The only thing that's changed is that her face usually isn't wet.

"Hera... are you... crying?" He brushes his thumb over her cheek,

wiping away some of the moisture, and she also wipes at her face, pulling it from beneath his fingers.

"Sorry," she apologizes. "It's just..." Her voice breaks.
"You're..."

"Hera..."

"I'm sorry, Kanan. I'm so sorry." She reaches up to touch his face this time, and he meets her hand with his. Then, he draws her in for a hug, and makes sure he holds onto her tight.

* * *

><p>The wind tugs at Ezra's hair as he walks back across the landing platform, towards the Ghost. It hasn't moved since from before they left, with the exception of the Phantom, which has been rightfully parked again.</p>

Chopper greets him as he walks up the ramp, kindly, and Ezra acknowledges him with a ghost of a smile, but not much else.

Sabine is in the hallway as he passes the common room, fixing a panel. She lifts up her headgear to say hello, but he quiets her with an acknowledging wave, and then ducks into his room and locks the door behind him.

He takes out the holocron from his pocket.

Before, he took it up to the hill a few clicks from the main base, spiders be damned, and wondered what would happen if he threw it into the clouds and off into oblivion, never to be seen again. It wouldn't undo what had happened, but it might make him feel better, like throwing a weight off his shoulders into the deepest reaches of space.

Except, this one, he kept close to him.

Up there, he came to conclusion that his friends fought and died for the little box, and it'd be like throwing away their sacrifices; ignoring them, which is something Ezra can't do. Especially a sacrifice as big as Kanan's, that still makes his heart heavy when he thinks about it.

He needs to know why.

Why did Maul betray him?

Why was Kanan blind?

Why was Ahsoka dead?

The box quivers between his fingers, so he sets it down on the floor, kneeling in front of it. He reaches out in the Force, feeling all of his friends across the base, all of them grieving in their own private ways, and also the little box, which reeks of the dark side. He is drawn to it again, like he was in the Temple; like Maul said he would be.

Ezra barely suppresses a shiver as he nudges it with his mind, and

nearly falls over when it nudges him back. It's cold. Like ice coursing through his veins, freezing up his thoughts and his breath, like there's nothing there to begin with.

Maybe, he thinks to himself, as the ice spreads across him, it's empty, and all of this was for nothing.

Something clicks.

He pries open an eye, and the box is hovering in front of his face, spinning in the air. He swallows, takes a deep breath, closes his eye again, and concentrates.

People had sacrificed so much for what was in this box. He wasn't letting fear stop him from sleeping at night, plagued by nightmares of darkness and fire; of Kanan and Ahsoka.

When he opens his eyes again, the holocron is open, and Ezra's never felt warmer in his life.

* * *

><p>Maul parks the TIE fighter on a ridge overlooking the steaming bog, and clammers into the little shack that's been abandoned for decades, since before Malachor, or before even Dathomir.</p>

He can't remember anymore.

All he remembers is what he's become, and that's nothing.

Humming an ancient Dathomirian lullaby, he closes the door, which crumbles slightly at the edges, but his breath is stolen from him when he turns around. The jar is still sitting there, exactly where he left it.

He stares for a while, then simply starts laughing.

"Oh, brother," he laments. "we're finally going to have what we've always wanted."

2. Chapter 2

Nothing.

It's been a week and there has been absolutely nothing. Ezra allowed himself to hope up until now, that perhaps Ahsoka bested Vader and would signal them for extraction, but the comms have been silent.

Endless scenarios run through his head about what happened at the top of that Temple; they plague his dreams as nightmares, and his waking moments as flashes of angry thoughts.

In some, Vader strikes Ahsoka down in an opening, leaving a deep orange-gash across her chest. In others, she is impaled, or beheaded, or choked.

In the worst ones, she lives, but to Vader's expense.

Except, they've heard nothing from Imperial forces about Vader, either. While Ezra's hope for Ahsoka dwindles, his hope that they'd eliminated or at most injured one of the most feared beings in the galaxy made it all a little more bearable.

"Go for a walk, kid," Sabine remarks in passing through the communications room, carrying something mechanical and important-looking. "You've been cooped up in here all day." She ruffles his hair with her spare hand. Smiling a little, he bats her off, and follows her through the base.

"Can I help?" he asks.

"You? With this?" Sabine keeps walking, briskly. Ezra tries to keep up. "Dream on."

"Oh, come on, Sabine! You know I'm good with things like that."

She stops at a door, pressing the release with her hand, balancing the machinery against her chest. Ezra ducks in after her, just as the door closes.

"I heard Kanan's up on the hill, maybe you two could do some Jedi r-and-r," Sabine says, peering around the corner of her pile of machinery as she sets it down. "Plus, this is all boring base stuff. It's a few cooling units."

"You've all been doing boring base stuff all week," Ezra moans. "No flying, no missions, no nothing! It's been weeks since we found this place and you're still not done!"

"Yeah, well, believe it or not, this is a mission," Sabine replies. She's digging around her belt for something. "Assigned directly from Sato himself. 'Sabine', he says, 'this is of utmost importance. If I don't get more cooling units in the food store, my gourmet dinner is going to go rotten'."

Ezra heaves a heavy sigh. "Fine, I get it. You don't need me to save Sato's dining habits," he answers.

Sabine smiles a little as she finds the tool she's looking for, attaching it to a piece of machinery perched on the table.

"I'll just be going, then," he announces over his shoulder, heading slowly towards the door. "Jedi r-and-r, super important. Way more important than Sabine Wren's important mission."

"See ya, Ezra," she shoots after him.

He pushes the release on the door, and ends up on the hill.

It's the one closest to the base. A short walk from the landing platform, up where Zeb first made up camp; it's got a good view of the reaches of the planet, and it's good for some fresh air away from the base. Kanan's using it for a complicated-looking kata when Ezra finds him.

The Force is engulfing the hill. It envelopes Ezra, too, and he breaths it in, welcoming it. It also helps Kanan: guiding his precise movements, helping him place his steps, and keep his balance as he

moves gracefully through the kata.

Ezra hasn't actually trained with him since Malachor. He's not sure if it's because he's been camped in the comms room all this week, up on his own hill attempting to meditate, or simply trying to avoid his thoughts.

Either way, it seems Kanan is doing fine without him.

Each move is elegant and controlled, landing against invisible blades and through transparent enemies. His lightsaber is held in relaxed fingers; nothing but an extension of his body. Ezra is mesmerised yet again with his Master, that despite everything, he's still a shining example of a Jedi.

Cool, calm, collected and strong. And blind.

It hadn't occurred to him at the time, on the top of the temple, but he'd felt Maul's blade across Kanan's face through their bond. At the time he easily dismissed it as the holocron, but the more he meditated this week, and thought, he realised it was a tingle of pain, not ice.

"_Kriff_," Kanan suddenly swears, dragging Ezra from his thoughts with a shudder.

He looks up, and Ezra's master is on the ground, in the process of picking himself back up. He'd fallen over.

By the time Ezra is close, he's already back his feet on, trading his lightsaber between both hands, breathing deeply. Then, sensing him in the Force, he stops, straightens, and turns to face him. "Hey," he says, a small smile playing on his lips. Ezra swallows. "Haven't seen you all week. Where you been hiding? Not the armoury again, I hope, those droids are going to have my head if they find you at their spare parts store again."

His tone is light, like the smile on his face, and Ezra can't bring himself to quip anything in response. "I'll train with you," he says instead.

"You want to spar?" Kanan seems surprised.

Of course, Ezra's lightsaber had been destroyed on Malachor, but his (illegal) diving through the junk piles had found him a replacement, strangely enough. It was the only thing he'd properly talked to Kanan about since returning from their mission.

Kanan told him it was a shoto, a lightdagger, usually used as a secondary, off-hand weapon or by shorter species who couldn't wield a lightsaber, like Master Yoda.

Ezra told him it was yellow.

"I'll go easy," Ezra replies.

Kanan's mouth quirks up in amusement. "I'm sure I'll be fine."

He ignites his lightsaber, slips into stance, and Ezra strikes. The Force embraces him again, as it does Kanan. Despite, Kanan quickly

slips into defence, blocking all of Ezra's strikes on firm feet. It's impossible to find an opening.

They tag back and forth for a long while, evenly matched in offence and defence, dancing across the sparse area of the hill. Ezra's not sure if their stalemate is because he's glad to finally have an outlet, and is pushing himself, or it's because Kanan is at a handicap.

It is impossible to hold back when your head is swimming with emotions. That's why he leaps off a rock formation, descending on Kanan from above with his blade raised and something bubbling in his chest.

He waits that split second for Kanan to raise his blue blade to meet his, but it never comes. So, Ezra lands, hovering the yellow blade inches from his neck.

"Got you," he announces, still on a high. However, Kanan doesn't move, and Ezra comes down quite quickly after that. "Kanan?" he asks carefully; hesitantly. Did he hurt him? Surprise him? Scare him?

"Sorry." Kanan snaps out of it. He's working at his jaw, eyebrows furrowed, his head turned towards Ezra. He's obviously in thought. "Must have slipped. A bit overbalanced on that last one, I think." He kicks at the ground, adding, "Lots of loose rocks up here, it's easy to lose your footing."

It's an excuse if Ezra's ever heard one.

Kanan adds, humour hanging off his words, "Plus, you said you go easy!"

"You said not to!" Ezra returns, defensively.

"Well, I was joking!" Kanan replies, punctuating his point with a gesture, but his voice is light; teasing. Ezra still swallows. "I can do that; joke! Being a Jedi isn't all about being serious, you know."

"I'm sorry," Ezra blurts in reply.

Kanan's features immediately settle into a frown. All traces of his teasing before are just another memory for Ezra to file away. "For what?" he inquires.

"I... I got lost," Ezra explains, still not quite sure himself, "in the flurry of it. I shouldn't have jumped on you." I shouldn't have used your blindness to my advantage, he adds, internally, but can't bring himself to say it. He knows what Kanan's reaction will be: to brush it off, like it's nothing. But it's not. It's everything. "I know it's still... different for you," he says instead, fumbling for words as Kanan's frown deepens, "I wasn't going to train with you, not until you asked me, but... but I'm your padawan. I'm supposed to be training with you. Helping youâ€"

"Hang on, hang on," Kanan stops him, hand raised. "Ezra, you're fine. I'm fine. We both are." He makes a point of pulling apart his lightsaber and securing it back to his belt, and Ezra makes a point

to ignore how he misses the clip the first time. "I gave you some space, I knew you'd need it. I think we all did. But you didn't have to spend it worrying about me."

And there it is. Brushing it off.

Ezra's throat catches on all the words he wants to say. Instead, he just shakes his head, and realises half a beat later that Kanan can't see.

"I just don't know," he replies.

Kanan smiles sadly. "I'm not asking you to know," he replies. "Just... take care of yourself, kid. I know it's been hard, but we're all here for each other."

Though Kanan might have been aiming to be reassuring, his words encourage the turmoil in Ezra's head, making his emotions race. He doesn't _need_ reassurances. They don't help him. He needs to fix it.

Fix Kanan.

Fix Ahsoka.

Fix the Empire and their kriffing Inquisitors.

Not take care of himself. How does that stop the Empire? How does it avenge _everything_ he'd lost this week?

"Yeah," Ezra answers, vaguely, not wanting to leave Kanan hanging. It wasn't his fault. "I'm sorry, Kanan," he apologises again. "I'm just going to... go. Sabine said I could help her."

"Oh." Kanan instantly deflates, and it breaks Ezra's heart, but he's not sure how else to deal with this, aside from slicing things into little, lightsaber sized pieces. But that's not how a Jedi deals with their emotions. They meditate. They overcome. They persevere. "Okay. You know where to find me."

Ezra swallows down the lump in throat, turns, and walks away. The Force retreats from the hill, and is replaced by the wind.

* * *

><p>Sabine isn't in the food storage when Ezra goes looking, which is fine, so he ends up on his own hill instead, a fifteen minute walk from the base.</p>

He tries to meditate, but his thoughts are dwelling on his and Kanan's duel before. The look on Kanan's face as Ezra pounced on him had been one of pure terror, he's sure of it.

So, the first time he tries to connect with Kanan after what's happened, he kriffs it up. It's as good a sign as any something's changed.

Maybe Kanan's blaming him for his blindness.

It is Ezra's fault, after all. It had been him who had had the vision

of Master Yoda, who sent the three of them to Malachor, leaving only him coming back in one piece.

It's unfair.

"Why did you send me there?" he finds himself asking under his breath, his voice pained, for any answer the Force can give. "Why did you send me there if you knew this would happen?"

There's no answer. Even the wind falls silent.

"How am I supposed to fight the Empire without... without my Master?" he asks. "You sent me there to fight it, fight Vader, but now... it's just..." He trails off, looking at his hands collected in his lap.

The silence continues.

"The dark side," he continues, his thoughts picking up speed. "Is that why you sent me to Malachor? To test me?" He looks up, hoping for MasterYoda, or any Jedi, or something, but it's just the expanse of the clouds, hugging the planet like a blanket. "Because I'm better than that, I'm a Jedi. I'm not a Sith. I just want to fight them. I want to protect my friends."

Nothing.

Ezra squeezes his eyes shut. "Please."

Somewhere in the distance, a bird calls across the plain, echoing around the hill. All it does is emphasise the silence.

"Answer me," he says. "Anyone, please. Answer me. I... I don't know what to do. The holocron... it's not even useful, it's just Sith teachings, not knowledge, or a weapon. I can't use that. I need something to fight with."

Beat.

Nothing.

"Answer me!" he cries, suddenly on his feet. "My Master is blind, my friend is dead because of you! All because of a kriffing holocron! I can't even use it, I can't, I'm a Jedi, not a Sith! I won't use the dark side, I won't!"

His words echo across the hill like the bird call, drowning out everything else, apart from the emotions drowning Ezra from the inside out. It's like before, when he fought Kanan; he's lost in it. The only difference: he hadn't been crying last time.

"All I wanted to do was protect my friends! Destroy the Empire! Save the galaxy! You tell me to fight, but people die. People always die. I lost my parents. My life. What good is fighting then, if I'm failing the very people I'm trying to protect?!"

Yoda doesn't answer. The Force doesn't answer.

Ezra curls into a ball and sobs.

3. Chapter 3

Sato finally assigns them a mission towards the end of rotation that day. The debrief calms Ezra's thoughts a little. It's something else to think about.

It's only a small, shakedown run to a nearby Imperial outpost, but it's still a mission all the same. It's a reason to get off this blasted rock. It's a reason to focus on where he's putting his feet, rather than where his feet have been.

Ezra's on the Ghost first thing that morning. Sabine arrives next, and then Zeb, who whoops, "Finally!" He takes an appreciative look around the cockpit. "If I had to do one more heaving lifting job, I'd give them a heavy plaster cast to go with their lazy arses."

"We did finish building work on the control room two days ahead of schedule," Sabine points out. She's brushing down one of her pistols with a cloth, sitting in the co-pilot's seat.

They shoot back and forth, but Ezra's only half listening. He sees Hera and Chopper enter the room, the former shaking her head as she takes the pilot's seat, smiling to herself. Probably at Zeb and Sabine's banter, or perhaps at the notion they're finally leaving and doing something rebellious.

They're still complaining about lounging around the base when Chopper makes an input, which Hera translates and Ezra actually listens, "Chop says you all don't have to worry about power cells going to waste."

"It's called sleep, ya bucket of bolts," Zeb points out. He takes a seat next to Chopper, patting him on his dome, grinning. "Which we all got plenty of during this week off. But karabast was it boring."

He continues on with Sabine again. Ezra takes a deep breath, watching as Hera flips switches and checks dials, preparing the Ghost for takeoff.

"Ezra?" she then asks gently and quietly. He realises when he looks down to meet her gaze, that he's standing right next to her chair, having been staring out the front window. "Are you okay?"

Rubbing the back of his head, smiling disarmingly, he answers, "Yeah, fine. Just glad to get a change in scenery, y'know?"

"I hear you," Hera agrees, turning back to her work, just as the cockpit door slides open and Kanan enters.

Ezra doesn't need to turn around to know it's him, because not only does he sense his mentor's presence, but Zeb and Sabine's playful banter comes to a quick stop.

"Don't sound so glum," Kanan remarks to fill the silence. "Even if it's just a few crates, we're still sticking it to the Empire."

"Any ammunition they're not shooting at us is good ammunition," Zeb agrees.

Chopper makes a sound any person could translate as agreement. Hera gives a bit of a chuckle at the chorus of enthusiasm from the little droid.

"All ready to go?" she asks, but everybody just looks at Kanan, Ezra included.

"Let's go steal some shit," Kanan says.

The Ghost lifts off, and Ezra watches as Chopper Base slowly disappears into the clouds as Hera takes them into the sky and beyond.

* * *

><p>They touch down on the moon less than a hour later. The stormtrooper patrols are quick to recognise when they're being robbed.</p>

Ezra deposits his two crates in the cargo hold into the waiting hands of Kanan, who is securing them safely. He ducks back outside to grab another two. Zeb and Hera are already running another two up the boarding ramp, with Sabine returning fire.

"I got it!" he announces to them in passing, his eyes on two close boxes, still sitting on the edge of a transport trolley. One of them is teetering on the edge, dodging all of the blaster bolts as if it could see.

Someone grabs his arm before he can leap onto the platform. Ezra doesn't need to turn around to know it's Kanan.

"Ezra, no_," he admonishes from where he's pushing Zeb and Hera's crates into the corner of the bay. Hera's already retreating up the ladder towards the cockpit, despite Chopper at the helm. "We've got enough. Plus, reinforcements are already well on the way, it's about to get crazy out there."

"No, I can get it." Ezra pulls away from him, and as if on cue, the reinforcements reach the platform, and the blaster fire turns into a hail.

Unfazed, he ducks outside in a run, passing Sabine, who is running back inside.

"Ezra!" she yells after him.

The two crates aren't far away, but are in the closing gap between the Ghost and the blockade of stormtroopers. It's a lot for a small outpost, which Ezra could ponder over later.

He's about to skid behind the trolley for cover when it catches a stray blaster bolt and explodes.

Ezra is thrown backwards. He's weightless for a few moments, with blaster bolts still flashing around him, and he catches sight of the Ghost in his tumble.

Then, he hits the platform again with a thud, the shock reverberating

through his hip and elbow as he lands. It's a sharp, hot pain that fades into a dull, persistent throbbing as he raises his head to regain his bearings.

From the compound, the stormtroopers are advancing, closing the gap between them and the Ghost.

Someone quickly helps him up and drags him back towards the Ghost. The ringing in his ears makes it impossible to make out what they're saying.

Only when the Ghost's ramp shuts with a hiss does Ezra register it's Kanan talking, Kanan's hand grasping at his shirt, and therefore Kanan who went to grab himâ€"blind, recovering, supposed-to-secure-the-crates-in-the-hold Kanan.

"That was reckless," he's lecturing Ezra, but still holding onto him, as if he's afraid Ezra will disintegrate under his fingers. "We were ready to go, Ezra. I told you and you didn't listen. You disobeyed an order, but more importantly, you put your life at risk."

"I'm fine," Ezra brushes him off, and Kanan lets go of his shirt, but his face is still stern.

Kanan continues, "It was just a pick up. We didn't need it all, just if we could. You know that, it's routine. And you know that if there's any time for heroics, it's not there."

"I said," Ezra gets to his feet, wobbling, and Kanan steadies him. His hand is awkwardly placed again on Ezra's sore hip. "I'm fine," he spits.

It's bothering him because he could have grabbed that crate. He could have finished their mission as Sato asked. He could have saved the last one, because he had a chance. He's just too stupid and slow to take it. And Kanan's lecturing him for it.

"Ezraâ€"" Kanan starts, gently this time.

"Save the lecture, Kanan!" he throws back. "It's the same one every time! Don't be reckless, don't be stupid, don't do this, don't do that. It's just rules, now, ever since we started with Sato and I hate it! I want to be back on Lothal!"

He uses Kanan's shocked pause to make for the closest door, away from the cargo bay, away from Kanan, anywhere. In his rush, he doesn't see Hera on the overlooking balcony, looking equally as shocked as Kanan.

Ezra ends up back in his room with the holocron in his hands, wondering if it was all worth it.

* * *

><p>For once, the Ghost is quiet.</p>

With their cargo needing delivery and processing, the crew had gone to attend to it, leaving Chopper to recalibrate the ship's computers, and Kanan to meditate.

He would have done it on the hill, but here in his room, he's surrounded by the aura of his friends, and it's a lot more soothing than the stillness and isolation on the hill.

Ever since Malachor, it's been harder to be alone. It's a shame he can't practice with his lightsaber on the Ghost, too.

Someone knocks on the door.

"It's open," he calls.

The door slides open, and Hera asks softly, "Can I come in?"

Kanan's mind is open to the Force at this moment, deeply immersed like he's underwater, so that he feels every ounce of Hera's concern, wonder and affection for him as she speaks. Her words are littered with it.

He releases his hold on the Force and returns slowly back to the normal world, his thoughts quickly beginning to jumble again. "Yeah." He remembers he's supposed to answer her. "Shut the door, please," he adds in afterthought.

Hera shuts the door, and comes to sit opposite him, on the floor. He imagines the way her lekku moves when she walks, and how she's looking at him right now.

"Everything okay?" he prompts when she says nothing. "Or didn't Sato didn't like our presents?"

"Sato's wondering how you went," she corrects.

He gives a bit of a chuckle. "What, in the cargo hold, where he assigned me? I think I secured those crates wonderfully. Processing droids would be proud."

She sighs. So does Kanan.

"The mission today was fine," he answers, "but Sato's assignment of me was stupid. You can tell him that. Hera gives an amused snort, and Kanan adds, "I can handle myself, I don't need people deciding what's best for me."

"You mean the mission, or the grounding?" Hera asks to clarify.

He shrugs. "Both, I guess. The base arrest this week was for my benefit. I get it, you're all worried about me, but I'm fine. I did some training, some repairs around the base, lent a hand, just got used to it. It did more for me than, well... talking about it would. And it didn't take long either, not with the Force."

"That's good," Hera replies, and sounds like she means it. "Nobody wanted you pushing yourself, that was all. It wasn't a rush to get back into field work."

"From the sounds of the Ghost this morning, everybody needed it," Kanan returns. "Ezra especially."

He hears Hera shift, but she doesn't get to her feet. "Did you talk to him about today?" she asks.

Kanan shakes his head, pressing his lips into a line. "Didn't get a chance. You saw him with those crates, the kid was going to get himself killed over a few rounds. Then he stormed off."

"That's just it," Hera says, "he's just a kid, Kanan. He's having trouble processing what happened." A soft smile creeps into her voice. "He needs you."

"What am I supposed to say to him?" Before Hera can offer an answer, to which Kanan doubts she has one anyway, he continues, "The dark side... it's... strong in him, Hera. I felt it yesterday, too, when we trained."

And he goes on, about Ezra's emotions, his spirit and his passion, his power and his determination, and the dark side and the light. He goes on for quite a while.

"I think," Hera says once he's finished, his head hung and his thoughts racing, "you need to tell him all that. He needs to know that you care about him."

"He's stupid if he thinks any of us don't," Kanan replies.

"Sometimes, love, it's always good to have a reminder." She sends a hand on his knee and gives it a squeeze, and he finds himself smiling a little. That's also when something in his chest lurches and the expression is once again foreign to his face.

"Oh Force," he swears. "He's... Hera, he's blaming himself, isn't he? For..." He gestures vaguely to himself. "this. It's why he won't talk to me. It's why he stormed off before; why he wanted to get those crates so badly." He gets to his feet. "I need to talk to him."

Hera gets up, too. "Kananâ€œ" she starts, but her comm-link goes off, and Kanan recognises it as Sato's signal. Something's probably happened. "Sorry," she apologises to him, and then answers, "Syndulla here."

"Captain Syndulla, you're going to want to see this," Sato's voice crackles over the comm.

Kanan looks her way, and he's sure she looks back, as they both start off towards the command centre together in a brisk walk.

Zeb and Sabine are already there, and something despairing radiates through the Force, just as Sato says, "We started receiving reports a few minutes ago. Intelligence reports Vader returned to Coruscant. And this, sent to us and other rebel cells on our older frequencies."

There's silence for a few moments, then Hera gasps from beside him. He doesn't understand why until an awful, evil voice begins talking, "I hope I am addressing the leader of this rebel insurgency when I say: this is your last warning. I know of your Jedi, of your fleets and your planets. I have entertained you for long enough, but after a direct attack on my apprentice... a poignant threat to my Empire, you cannot expect a man such as I to stand idly by and continue this

game. No, rebels, I shall destroy you, starting with you, Caleb Dume. And you will never see me coming._"

* * *

><p>Ezra realises, being up on the hill is similar to when he would sometimes sit on the balcony of his tower, watching all of the ships fly in and out of the city. There, he'd allow his thoughts to drift away with the crafts, seamlessly through the air despite their impossible size.</p>

Except, he's not frustrated now. He's just tired.

His body aches too much to try anything with his borrowed lightsaber, so he just sits there, palms planted behind him in the dirt, watching the clouds.

He's not surprised when Kanan silently joins him, equally as tired.

"You and I, we need to have a talk," his Master eventually says, but he's not angry. There's no trace of anything in his words, his face of the Force besides love, and it breaks Ezra's heart into tiny little pieces.

"Is this about today?" Ezra asks.

"Kinda," Kanan replies. "Kinda about... well, everything. Since Malachor. But now that you mention it..." Kanan leans closer. "You're not hurt, are you? You took a pretty hard fall."

Ezra shrugs. "Nothing I can't handle."

Kanan doesn't answer him. Not for a while, anyway. Ezra's not sure how many clouds pass the barren hill before Kanan finally answers, "You know, some Jedi could use the Force to heal. Even the most extreme injuries, physical and emotional, Jedi healers could weave the Force into your injuries."

"Bacta works too," Ezra points out "But Jedi healing sounds cooler, I'll give you that." Then, he changes his position, to hugging his knees instead. He looks over to his Master. "Kanan?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry."

"I know, kid," he replies. "Me too. I'm a pretty lousy Master, huh?"

Ezra finds himself smiling a little bit. "The best one I've ever had. Also the worst. Go figure."

"You're hilarious," Kanan deadpans. Then, he sighs a lengthy sigh, and Ezra swallows. "Kid, I mean it, I'm sorry. You needed me this week and I wasn't there. So... anything you need, Ezra, anything at all, you tell me. Anything you want to talk about, or want to ask about... just... shoot. Because it's why I'm here. Even if I'm shit at it. A man's gotta try."

There's a million different things Ezra feels about Kanan Jarrus, alas, a million things he could say next. He could ask him if he blamed him for Malachor, if he thought he was weak, if he thought he was still a Jedi, if he doubted his alignment with the light, about Hera, about anything."

"Vader's still alive, isn't he?"

Kanan freezes, then answers with his head hung, "... Yes."

"So it was all for nothing."

"No, Ezra, it wasn't," Kanan insists. He turns to Ezra now, leaning closer still, and Ezra's expecting something, but not for Kanan to wrap his arms around him, one hand cradling the back of his head. It's so intimate and un-Jedi like. So's crying, which Ezra's doing. Again. "It's okay," Kanan says. "It's alright, Ezra, it's going to be okay. I promise."

Ezra almost believes him.

4. Chapter 4

That night, Ezra sleeps for his first full night cycle since Malachor.

Even if things are nowhere near okay, there's a sense of calm slowly settling over his previously raging thoughts, that perhaps, he and Kanan can work through this together. Things are just different now. They will be forever.

So, just when the base gurgles to life, with pilots leaving for their scouting missions, squadrons leaving for their skirmishes, and controllers directing ships left and right off the platform, Ezra climbs to the top of his hill again.

The wind tugs at his hair, but he pays it no mind, instead, focused on keeping his thoughts calm. Concentrating on that, and the Force.

Ezra wills it to flow through him, like a river winding through weathered rocks, and carefully caressing the sediments of the river bank. It makes it easier to sort out what's going on in his mind. Everything seems clearer when the Force is with him.

He sits cross-legged on the centre of the hill, overlooking the valley, and lets his eyes fall closed.

"Master Yoda," he says, inhaling, and then exhaling, expanding the Force across the furthest reaches of the valley in time with his breath. "Please, I want to talk to you."

Silence.

"Master Yoda," he tries again, and checks his thoughts are settled; nothing but a wisp of the amount of the Force that is flowing through him. "I'm seeking your counsel. Please."

Again, nothing.

"I'm sorry." Ezra swallows. "Last time... I-I was upset, frustrated. A Jedi shouldn't let himself be controlled by his emotions, and I was. I want to sort through them, and I'm asking for your advice. Please."

"Hmm," an ancient voice reverberates around the hill. Ezra opens his eyes, and rather than on Chopper Base, he's sitting in the midst of a damp, green-brown bog. He's perched, cross-legged, on an old tree stump, and opposite him, is Master Yoda, thumbing the top of a short gimmer stick. "Wish to examine your feelings, you do, young one?" he asks.

Ezra bows his head. "Yes, Master."

"Then tell me what is troubling you, you must," Yoda responds.

Now, that is a good question, as presently, a lot of things are bothering Ezra Bridger. Predominantly, his emotional turmoil lies with Malachor, but also at what his emotions have led to: his outbursts to his friends, and the holocron.

"My master..." he starts slowly. "Kanan, he's..." It's hard, because he hasn't actually said it to himself all week, because, perhaps, keeping the word from his lips somehow won't make it true. "... blind."

Yoda regards him for a few silent moments. "The journey to Malachor," he then says, quite purposefully, "a difficult one it has been, for both you and your Master."

"Yes," Ezra answers, a lump quickly forming in his throat.

"Feel it is your fault, you do?" Ezra can seldom only nod in reply to the grand master. "And mine you feel, too, do you not?"

His gaze quickly flies back to Yoda's, who meets his eyes steadily. "No, Iâ€œ" he is quick to respond, but his voice cracks, and Yoda stares him down, so he lets his chin fall to his chest again in defeat. "... Yes," he replies, slowly. "You sent me there to fight but... but... now everything feels so hopeless and I don't know what to do. Every time I try to fix something, it just goes wrong, or I get angry and I... I..."

"Direct your feelings to the Force, you must," Yoda schools, making it seem a hundred parsecs easier than it actually is, for Ezra to control his emotions. "Your peace and trust in the Force led you to me now, it did. And again, the Force will direct you, but trust in it first, you must."

"I..." Ezra wants to object, because everything feels like it could fall apart again at any moment, like a paper castle beneath his feet. "... understand, Master."

"Hmm," Yoda says again. "Malachor, sent you there to fight, I did, and fought you have, fought well. With Vader and his Inquisitors, you fought, but also much more."

That quickly nicks Ezra from his dwelling thoughts, his gaze meeting Yoda's. "The dark side?" he clarifies.

Yoda makes a noise of affirmation. His eyes bore into Ezra's as he speaks, "Stirs within you, it does. But trust in the Force, you must, to lead you down the path of the light."

It almost feels like an accusation, and it stirs something unsettling in Ezra's chest all of a sudden.

"I'm not a Sith," he returns, adamant. "I'm a Jedi."

At that, Yoda looks slowly to the ground.

Ezra swallows down the sudden burst of emotion rising through him, because he came to Yoda looking for answers, and so far, has barely anything. It's frustrating, but Jedi don't get frustrated. They trust in the Force.

"Emotion," Yoda then says, "yet peace. Ignorance, yet knowledge. Passion, yet serenity. Chaos, yet harmony. Death, yet the Force." He pauses to meet Ezra's gaze again. "Know these words, do you, young one?"

"Should I?" It comes off slightly more defensive than he intends.

"The mantra of the Jedi code," Yoda supplies. "Bring you peace, it will. Guide your feelings, it should."

"But... how_, Master?" he has to ask. "I trust the Force, I do, but I still don't know what to do. Kanan... I... I want to help him but I can't_. I don't know how to."

He thinks for a moment, that perhaps Yoda will advise him, but the grand master simply lowers his head again. "Soon," he says, gently, "horrible trials you will face, padawan, but a Jedi, you must be."

Ezra blinks, and he's sitting back on the hill again.

He sits in silence for a few moments, contemplating the grand master's words, but ends up gathering the Force around him and toppling the closest rock formation with an almighty push.

Then, he sits back down, a hand threaded into his hair, and stares into the endless reaches of the valley.

* * *

><p>The rest of the day, he helps Sabine and Zeb with boring base stuff, and fits one too many lights for his personal sanity.</p>

* * *

><p>"I haven't seen you all day, kid," Kanan says, from Ezra's doorway. Startled, he nearly drops the lightsaber he's been fiddling with.</p>

"I was with Sabine," he replies. "And you seemed pretty busy with Hera... so..."

"Oh, yeah, that. A bit of mission planning. Sato's got a few ops for the next few weeks, he wanted my input." There's a stretch of silence for a few moments, where Ezra looks down at the borrowed lightsaber in his hands, and then Kanan asks, "Can I come in?"

"Uh, yeah. Sure." Ezra's perched on his bunk, so he scoots over, making room for Kanan. Once he's close, the apprentice takes the Master's arm, guiding him to sit down next to him.

"Thanks," Kanan replies. It sends a pang of... something through Ezra's core that he doesn't like. "You looking at that lightsaber again?" he asks, probably just to fill the approaching silence.

"Yeah," Ezra replies, a little surprised he knew. "Been trying to figure out where it came from."

"Let me feel it again."

Ezra deposits the weapon into Kanan's waiting palm. From there, his Master trades it between both his hands, weighing it, and then throws it into the air. It flips once, and he catches it.

"Yeah, still got nothing," he says, a hint of amusement in his voice. "Typical lightsaber shoto, nothing unique about the design, really." He offers it back to Ezra, who takes it, re-attaching it back to his belt. "We'll have to get you a new one," he says.

"Aren't kyber crystals incredibly rare?" raises Ezra, regarding his Master with a sideways glance.

"Never stopped us before, has it?" Kanan grins a little, but sobers quickly. "When you're up for it, kid, we'll get you a new lightsaber. You can't keep using a borrowed one, it's supposed to be bad luck."

"It's good enough for now," Ezra returns. "Plus, I found it. There was no one to borrow it from in the first place."

"You knew what I meant," Kanan accuses, grinning a little again. Like before, it fades quickly, and he turns to look at Ezra. "I actually came to ask about... uh, well, training. I think we need a rematch after last week."

At first thought, the idea of training again is a good one, to release his frustrations into physical exercise, also while trying to work with Kanan. But then, he's drawn back to last time they sparred, and the look on Kanan's face when Ezra delivered the finishing strike.

"Are you sure?" he asks, and watches Kanan's face carefully.

"Very," Kanan replies. He just looks determined; his eyebrows are narrowed, and his lips are pressed together with the slightest hint of a smirk. "Dunno about you, my sword arm is literally itching from all this boring base stuff."

"You can say that again," Ezra agrees. "I was up a ladder all day fitting lights,"

"Well, I was listening to Sato drawl about fuel reserves, and trying not to make faces at Hera," Kanan returns, like a challenge. "I think I win this one. Sorry, kid." There's another grin on his face, which all of a sudden, is highly contagious. "Like I'm gonna win this rematch."

"You're so on, Kanan," Ezra says, determined, and in that moment, everything seems a little bit better.

* * *

><p>It's some ungodly hour in the morning when Ezra is disturbed by a sudden sinking feeling in his chest, setting his heart on edge. Master Yoda's words from this morning also take this moment to echo across his thoughts, which isn't enough to pull him from his warm bunk.<p>

Instead, he turns over, and settles back down into the blankets, and drifts off again. The tendrils of sleep reach for him, and Ezra is about to welcome them, but then, an unfamiliar presence brushes his mind. The Ghost creaks.

Not Master Yoda, then.

Ezra grabs his borrowed lightsaber from the nearby compartment, and then pauses again, listening. Light footsteps adorn the hallways outside his shared room.

"Zeb," he hisses, as the ship groans again, under the weight of a stranger's feet. "Zeb, get up, there's someone on the Ghost."

The Lasat doesn't move, always the heavier sleeper, and Ezra's about to prod him, but there's a snap-hiss from further up the hallway, and an hum which should be comforting suddenly sets ice into Ezra's heart.

That's not Kanan, the Force tells him, like a stab to his chest.

When Ezra scrambles into the hallway, however, it's empty. All of the crew's rooms are locked, free of lightsaber marks, but there's still something awful nearby, radiating hatred and anger into the Force.

He keeps his lightsaber raised but not ignited, and places his steps carefully, moving towards the beacon of dark in the Force. He realises, suddenly, that it's coming from Kanan's room, which is when his heart stops for a few moments.

Something is terribly, terribly wrong.

Kanan is always a beacon in the Force, like a star, to which the old travellers used to guide their ships. He is an anchor for Ezra, both in the real world, and in the Force, as an essence of nothing but light.

Except now.

When he reaches out for Kanan's comforting presence, there's nothing but whispers of life which dissipate into the air, and then suddenly,

nothing at all.

Ezra can't breathe.

He crashes down his mentor's door with the Force raging beneath his fingers, and has his blade raised to meet Kanan's assailant, but the room is empty. There's no assailant, no lightsaber, and no danger.

Save the crumpled form on the floor, that is.

"Kanan," he chokes out, crashing to the floor. "Kanan." As if he were made of glass, Ezra brushes his fingers over his mentor's shoulder, trying to rouse him, he's still. Too still. "Kanan, no. No, no, no. Please, no, not him, not Kananâ€"" Desperate now, Ezra's hands scramble over Kanan's face, trying to find purchase on his cheeks, or his forehead, or anything, but there is nothing but a shell of life. "Kanan! No, Kanan please, Kanan... please... wake up... Kanan..."

He presses his head into Kanan's chest, which is soundless, and lets everything consume him. It's so violent, like a tornado which tears through every resolve he's built since he lost his parents, and escapes out of his throat as a scream. He screams, hoarsely, and endlessly, into Kanan's dead chest, but it doesn't make anything better.

It just hurts, like he's being burned alive, and his head is on fireâ€_

"Finally, a true tragedy," a deep voice suddenly laments from behind Ezra, sounding almost pitiful, but Ezra can see right through it immediately. Because he knows that voice, and he knows he can use all of this pent up rage and pure terror to end him, finally, once and for all.

It only takes a split second for the apprentice to raise his golden blade, pivot, and launch himself at the Zabarak standing cloaked in the entrance to Kanan's room.

With an almighty cry, he brings down his lightsaber onto Maul's head, and it passes straight through.

Maul is nothing but a wisp, which at Ezra's lightsaber, disappears into the air, leaving a trail of black and red particles, like dust. Ezra gives another pained cry, and swings again, blindly, at the air around him.

Maul starts laughing.

"Now, now, Ezra. What is it? Hate leads to the dark side. Or something along those lines."

"You killed him! You killed my Master!" Ezra screams in response, and swings again, with so much fury he slices through the wall adjacent to Kanan's bunk, leaving a sizable hole. "You took everything from me! He was everything to me, he's my father because the Empire took mine! I didn't want this! I didn't want to be a Jedi and you still took it from me!"

"I never leave my work unfinished," Maul returns, his voice controlled, despite the pure power radiating around the room from Ezra's hate-filled words. "What, did you expect I would try to blind any man who defied me? No, Ezra, I was trying to cut off his head."

A red blade appears with a snap-hiss in front of Ezra's face, stopping him in his tracks. He can just see Maul's yellow teeth gleaming at him in a wolfish smile.

"Tell me, little one, have you looked at the holocron yet?" he asks.

Utter pain and turmoil rack through his mind, but still, somehow, the teachings contained in the little box brush to the top of his memory. Ezra squeezes his eyes shut, trying to block them out, and focuses instead on the heat of Maul's red blade mere inches from his face.

When he opens them again, he's staring at the top of his bunk, his heart hammering in his ears. Maul is gone, Kanan shines in the Force from down the hall, and Zeb rolls over in his sleep.

Ezra takes a deep, shaky breath, and a 'fresher visit later, finds himself wandering up to the hill in the middle of the night.

There, he looks down and the holocron in his hands, and out over the darkness of the valley.

End
file.